

Fugue, Hip Hop and Soap Opera: Transcultural Connections and Theatrical Experimentation in Twenty-First Century US Latina Playwriting

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A tension can exist between theatrical experimentation and commercial viability. If a playwright writes a play which challenges traditional notions of structure, character and language, will her play get produced? If her play solely adheres to hegemonic, dramaturgical norms, is it more likely to get produced? Early twenty-first century Latina playwrights are writing plays with fractured narratives, multi-cultural characters and linguistic hybridities. In this essay, through examining *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue* by Quiara Alegría Hudes, *Tropic of X* by Caridad Svich and *Fuente* by Cusi Cram, I propose that these playwrights' theatrical experimentations, created by exploring and subverting diverse artistic models, reflect the dynamics of transculturation and that the resulting plays are not only commercially viable but vital to twenty-first century US theater.

Hudes, a Yale-trained composer, utilizes compositional fugue structure in her play, *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue* as she delves into the life of a Puerto Rican veteran from Philadelphia confronting a second tour of duty in Iraq. A fugue consists of a composition for multiple voices or instruments in which "a subject is stated unaccompanied in a single voice (or instrument). Then a second voice enters with the answer... The original voice continues with the counterpoint against the answer. After this a third voice enters in turn with the subject again while the first two voices continue with counterpoint against it. Finally, a fourth voice enters, now with the answer, while all three of the other voices accompany it with counterpoint" (Verrall ix). The overall subject of Hudes' play is Elliot's military service in Iraq and the question of whether he'll return for a second tour of duty. Hudes engages the repetition of the subject by treating Elliot's father's, mother's and grandfather's military

service in Vietnam and Korea. In the production notes to her play, Hudes explains that “in the ‘fugue’ scenes, people narrate each other’s actions and sometimes narrate their own” (6). Thus, Hudes also engages the relationship between subject and answer by the characters’ reflecting one another’s actions.

In the description of the music in the play’s foreword, Hudes writes “Flute. Bach, danzones, jazz, etudes, scales, hip-hop beats. Overlapping lines” (6). However, Hudes chooses a fugue to structure her play and not a *danzón* or other art form. The structural polyphony in the fugue allows for a multiplicity of voices echoing each other while maintaining their unique identities. In utilizing the fugue structure, Hudes sets up the expectation of a multi-vocal landscape which surrounds one main theme or idea. By extension, this implies a dynamic of constancy versus imitation or standard versus variation. Further, this also connotes a relation between hegemonic and subaltern. No matter how far the variation or repetition of the answer strays from the subject, it is always defined in light of the subject as the norm. Thus, on one level, Hudes could be stating that the impact of the subject of military service is all pervasive and that regardless of generation or military conflict, the devastation of war is universal. However, also embedded in this play is the notion of the Ortiz family’s Puerto Rican culture versus their US lives. With the US life being the hegemonic standard, the Puerto Rican culture then takes a subaltern position, existing in counterpoint to the subject of the majority US culture which Elliot and his family embrace in their Philadelphia existence.

Hudes titles each of the fourteen scenes in her play as either a fugue or a prelude. The four fugue scenes divide the play into sections which mark major events in Elliot’s life in the play: preparing to ship off for his first tour of duty, Elliot’s killing a person in Iraq, Elliot’s leg injury in Iraq and Elliot’s shipping off for his second tour of duty. The ten prelude scenes poetically reverberate with all the many aspects surrounding Elliot’s military service: his press interviews, letters written by his father and grandfather during their military tours of duty and the Ortiz garden oasis. Time bends and refracts as Hudes mines the complexities of Elliot’s life as a soldier and his return as a decorated war hero.

The play’s opening scene effectively develops the fugue model as the older generations echo the dynamics and reality of Elliot’s service. In this scene, Hudes establishes three generations of men in the Ruiz family: Elliot, 18, Pop, his father and Grandpop, his grandfather, as well as Elliot’s mother, Ginny. As Elliot, a Marine, is preparing to leave for a first tour of duty in

the Iraq War, Ginny begins the first scene of the play with a description of the location:

GINNY: A room made of cinderblock.

A mattress lies on a cot containing 36 springs.

If you lie on the mattress, you can feel each of the 36 springs.

One at a time.

As you close your eyes.

And try to sleep the full four hours.

Next Pop describes the bed sheets where “the corners are folded and tucked under.” Further, Grandpop adds that “the corner of the sheet is checked at 0600 hours, daily.” Then Elliot announces his own arrival, “A man enters.” Thus in this scene, the fugue structure functions in several ways: character’s narration of action, character’s narrative answering the main subject and actual music and song colliding. As the scene continues, time jumps to 1966 when Pop is serving in the Vietnam War. Next, time jumps to 1950 when Grandpop is serving in the Korean War. The scene continues with the main subject of Elliot’s departure, echoed by the counterpoint of Pop’s and Grandpop’s military service. Time refracts and bends as the narrative lines of the Ortiz men harmonize with each other. The scene ends with Grandpop assembling a flute, putting it to his lips and beginning to play “the melody of a Bach passacaglia.” As the flute continues, Pop begins a military chant, “1234, We’re gonna jump on the count of four....” Lastly, Elliot, his head bobbing listening to a walkman, starts to sing the hip hop tune, “Got Yourself a Gun” by Nas, “Uh, uh. And when I see ya I’m a take what I want so you trying to front, hope ya got ur self a gun....” In her stage direction, Hudes describes, “It is three-part counterpoint between the men” (7-12). Thus, the music of three generations of Ortiz men in the military, from the seventeenth century Bach passacaglia, to twentieth century military march cadences to a twenty-first century hip hop song collide in this orchestrated fugue.

Another aspect of the fugue is the counter-subject which occurs when “the material which accompanies the answer is used again against subsequent statements of either subject or answer” (Verrall 19). Hudes’s fugue model utilizes the character of Elliot’s mother, Ginny, to establish the counter-subject through the world of their garden in Philadelphia. Ginny, an Army nurse, created the private oasis a few months after her return from Vietnam in which she converted an abandoned lot into a lush garden reminiscent of Puerto Rico: “I said, when I’m done with this, it’s going to be a spitting image of Puerto Rico. Of Arecibo. It’s pretty close. You can see electric wires dangling

like right there and there. But I call that ‘native Philadelphia vines’” (15). This garden flourishes and becomes a retreat and refuge for the Ortiz family and the location in which four of the prelude scenes take place. The garden also becomes a cultural oasis in the midst of an urban environment where the Ortiz family can literally connect to their roots, reminding themselves who they are and where they come from. In the forward to her play, Hudes writes, “The ‘garden space,’ by contrast, is teeming with life. It is a verdant sanctuary, green speckled with magenta and gold...holy in (its) own way” (5). Hudes echoes the dynamic in a number of US Latina/o plays with roots in the Caribbean in which the US characters’ utopic yearnings for island life often drives the action of the play. Here, the garden becomes a sort of tropical paradise or a garden of Eden. Thus, being cast out of the garden means one is relegated to experience the harsh realities of war and/or a life in the US, which does not necessarily embrace the purity and beauty of the Ortiz family’s Puerto Rican culture.

By titling her play *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue*, Hudes sets up the expectation that the play will contain a singular fugal construction. Yet in the structure of her play, Hudes doesn’t completely adhere to the fugue model. The play goes back and forth in time between scenes titled prelude and fugue. The four fugues reflect pivotal moments in Elliot’s military service and the preludes illuminate the influences on Elliot’s life before and after his first tour of duty. Nevertheless, by moving back and forth between prelude and fugue, the complexity of a fugue is not fully developed. By only choosing four fugue moments and using the preludes to highlight that which influences these moments, Hudes does not fully delve into the reverberations of Elliot’s military service and the physical and psychological impact of war. While the spare poetic quality of the piece is impressive, the back and forth nature of the structure provides the audience with only brief glimpses into Elliot’s military experiences. Some of those glimpses are harrowing, such as the recounting of Elliot’s war injury in Tikrit where his leg is badly damaged; however, Hudes does not provide a deeper view into the lasting impact of that wound in subsequent scenes, preferring to jump backward or forward in time.

In *The Archive and The Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Diana Taylor argues that transculturation is a “shifting or circulating pattern of cultural transference. The measurable impact of the ‘major’ on the ‘minor’ can be a long time coming” (108). However, twenty-first century transculturation is not so much a circulating pattern as it is a dynamic organism which grows, breaks down, regenerates and becomes a

new creation, discarding the binary of major and minor for a constellation of minors, each vying for supremacy but each co-existing simultaneously. When the organism breaks down, this often can more fully illuminate transcultural complexities in the process. Thus the breakdown of the fugue structure in Hudes' play may indeed be the point. Hudes chooses a fugue, a Western European construct, to explore the military life of Elliot Ortiz. Perhaps Hudes does not construct one single flawless fugue for just as Elliot struggles between past and present, military duty and the lure of civilian life, national service and individual desire, US culture and Puerto Rican culture, the fugue cannot fully express the transcultural dynamics of Elliot's journey.

Nonetheless, the formalism of the fugue structure in certain ways also echoes the formalism of military structure with strict rules and procedures which must be upheld. With Elliot injured in Iraq and Pop injured in Vietnam, Hudes demonstrates that these military rules and procedures do not always create an airtight structure for survival. The polyphony of fugal voices which correlates to the collective of military voices cannot exist without consideration of each individual's prelude to service and the issue surrounding military life. This interjection of the individual into the collective breaks down the fugue and threatens to break down Elliot's future military career. Therefore, as Hudes closes her play with unresolved dangling fugal elements, perhaps this accurately echoes the complex unknown which Elliot must navigate as he embarks on his second tour of duty in Iraq.

Svich's *Tropic of X* also reflects musical influence in its structure. Svich bills the play as a "poetic, Latin, Hip-hop-infused drama" (Caridad Svich). Hip-hop can be defined as "a U.S. based musical style marked by rhythmic, spoken sung declamation (i.e. rap) over prerecorded backing tracks or beats" (Rivera 6). Written in twenty-three scenes, Svich's linear narrative explores the lives of Maura, a "female arcade junkie and petite wannabe-assassin," Mori, her male lover and accomplice and Kiki, "part-time hustler of fluid gender" as they negotiate the terrain of a Latin American city amidst its "migration, exploitation, intersexuality and globalization" (12). Part One, Fabian, a Euro tourist hires Mori for a sexual encounter. However, in Part Two, Fabian "now in another guise" (54) becomes a torturer who arrests Mori for loitering. As Maura fights to find her lost love, Fabian is erasing Mori's identity. When the two lovers are finally reunited, their connection is irrevocably lost, a fact further reflected in their subsequent deaths.

William Jelani Cobb writes in *To The Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on the Hip Hop Aesthetic* that hip hop "began as a multicultural movement.

It represented the artistic communion between young Latinos, West Indians and post-migration African-Americans” (6). Further, Cobb states the musical genre is “literally a product of the African Diaspora...that body of Africa-derived cultures specifically those of North America and the Caribbean” (7). Therefore, in this play set in the Americas, Svich uses hip-hop to describe and reflect the globalization of this transcultural art form. She doesn’t choose a distinctly Latin American musical form such as reggaeton, which draws upon “reggae, hip-hop, and a number of Spanish Caribbean styles...which emerged from Puerto Rico in the late 1990s” (Rivera xv). Her choice of hip hop is symbolic of the transcultural world of this play and thus allows for a panoply of cultural collisions in the Americas. By using this model, Svich also utilizes the manipulation of sound and the collision of rap with pre-existing song as a metaphor for the colonization of indigenous culture in Latin America.

In *José Can You See: Latinos On and Off Broadway*, Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez posits that in US Latino theater in the nineties, transculturation focused less on the connection between Latino culture and Anglo-American culture and was “more layered with cultural/ethnic exchanges between Latinos/a (and Latin Americans) who previously had little contact with each other” (123). Yet, in the twenty-first century, these exchanges widen to include a greater variety of cultures: Latina/o, Latin American, Anglo-American, European and African-American. Therefore, the hip hop model more fully exemplifies this new level of transcultural exchanges. Hip hop implies that worlds coexist equally and collide through an urban and diasporic identity amidst spoken word, rhythmic beats and pre-existing recordings. Unlike the strict formalism of the fugue, hip hop allows for a greater flexibility and simultaneous autonomy of cultural worlds. No hegemonic and subaltern binaries exist in this paradigm whereas in the fugue, such binaries are often embraced. Just as the variety of cultures in the Americas intersect to create new transcultural identities, the hip hop musical collage allows for a variety of voices to co-exist on a level playing field.

Svich most effectively utilizes this model in Part One as the worlds of Maura, Mori, Kiki and Fabian collide. The structure moves in linear time, with the scenes functioning as episodic fragments illuminating the characters’ lives. Each scene’s title summarizes an aspect of its action. For example, scene two entitled, “The arcade junkies, Maura and Mori look at the tourist” (15) highlights the fact that the two scrutinize a male European tourist. However, the title does not fully elucidate the violence brimming underneath their gaze as Maura plots to attack the tourist, “Screw you Euro. We should jump him

now. We should annihilate him like an effing Ninja matrix warrior” (21). The scene titles serve as duplicitous framing devices which announce a surface perception but do not reveal the true nature of each character’s reality.

While exploring the linguistic collisions in the Americas, Svich also applies this hip hop model. In *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “There is no one Chicano language just as there is no one Chicano culture” (80). She refers to the reality that Chicano culture is complex and as such Chicanos speak a variety of languages including “1. Standard English 2. Working class and slang English 3. Standard Spanish 4. Standard Mexican Spanish 5. North Mexican dialect 6. Chicano Spanish 7. Tex-mex 8. Pachuco (caló)” (77). Anzaldúa highlights the iterations and hybridities of language in Chicano culture. Likewise, Svich demonstrates that there’s no one Latina/o language as there is a multiplicity of Latina/o cultures. Svich captures the collisions of English and Spanish in U.S. and Latin American cultures and the performative language of disc jockeys, “arcade junkies” and torturers. In scene one, Svich acknowledges the linguistic complexities of her play through Hilton, “the DJ cowboy of the island airwaves” as he begins with a hip hop rant grounding the play “in the polyglot Americas, leaning south”:

HILTON. This is the electric boogaloo of the cowboy of the islands
who seeks remedy,
remedy and fast, for his ailing everything
because everything is broken down
down
and way down
in the triple crown
of the Mayor and Governor
and all the Powerful with the capital P (12-13).

Sikh’s hip hop model however collapses in Part Two. Whereas the subversion of Hudes’ fugue model results from a structural avoidance of stability, Svich’s breakdown results from the resurgence of a hegemonic and subaltern binary which resists problematization. This dynamic can be seen most starkly in the characters of Fabian and Mori. In Part One, Fabian has a range of linguistic options and identities whereas Mori remains rooted in his culture.

FABIAN. In what language do you want me to speak?
[French] Combien voulez-vous?
[German] Wieviel wunschen Sie?

[Italian] Quanto desiderate?

[Chinese] ...

[Spanish] Cuanto deseas?

...what's your name?

MORI. What do you care? I rim you and we're done with.... (47)

Fabian possibly being Spanish hints that he is colonizing, exploiting or conquering Mori, yet Mori still has agency. In Part Two, through violent interrogation, Fabian begins to strip away Mori's language and his identity. First after trying to teach Mori a new language of oppression, Fabian attempts to completely erase Mori's identity by taking away his name and renaming him with numbers.

FABIAN. ...You are number 015125.

You will answer to this number and this number only.

You are now a female, understand? A girl. No trace.

MORI. What?

FABIAN. You have no memory. (70)

Through violence, torture and gender reassignment, Fabian eviscerates Mori. Hence, there is no co-existence of hip hop voices any longer, only one voice which dominates the linguistic discourse and shapes identity through a monolithic methodology which outlaws diversity. Fabian in certain respects may represent the Spanish conquistador who fought to eliminate indigenous language and culture in the Americas as well as the dictatorships which disappeared citizens, stripping them of language, identity and life. As Maura arrives to save Mori, she finds he is completely brainwashed. Maura tries to tell him his name but he replies, "I am 015125. I was born in another country. I am a girl, age twenty. I am dead. Stop looking at me." Further, when Maura tries to connect with him, Mori spits out the language of his torturers, "Lesson number one thousand and two: do not leave, do not try to leave, never leave, or much drowning, head in bucket, pulling of limbs" (102-03). Finally, as Maura tries to say his name, Mori, at this point seemingly irretrievably damaged replies, "Erase memory" (105). Svich connects erasure of memory, language, accent and gender and states that the loss of language is directly linked to the loss of cultural and gender identity. Thus, the transcultural hip hop model is but a distant memory at the play's end.

While Hudes's fugal transactions reflect Elliot's complexities, by jettisoning the hip hop model in the latter part of her play, Svich effectively demonstrates that the result of dictatorship and torture in the Americas silences any vocal multiplicity. While at first, the hip hop model influences

the characters' cultural landscapes, allowing for the co-existence of Maura, Mori and Fabian, this very model also gives rise to the oppressive voice of Fabian which ultimately becomes dominant, trying to eradicate any hint of non-conformity. Thus by constructing and deconstructing the hip hop paradigm, Svich problematizes the complexities of Latin American cultural relations as well as the hegemonic imprint left on the subaltern voices in the Americas which continue to struggle to be heard.

While Hudes and Svich engage musical forms, the underpinning of Cram's *Fuente* involves a soap opera model, which is not only echoed in the dynamics of the characters but also serves as a cultural memory that fuels the characters' journeys.¹ Told in two parts and twenty-four scenes, Cram's play revolves around the residents of Fuente, "a southern, desert place, not as far south as you can go but south nonetheless" (5). The action in Part One surrounds the disruption of two couples' lives: Soledad and Chapparo; who are lovers and Adela and Esteban, who are married. Chaparro loves Soledad, yet Soledad wants more than her life in Fuente, as she states, "I want a life that's all mixed and different than this one" (9). Soon, she runs away from Fuente with Esteban, the husband of pregnant Adela. As Adela and Chaparro deal with the aftermath of their respective partners fleeing together, the action continues exploring the present predicaments in all four characters. Part One ends with Esteban and Soledad stranded in the desert as thunder and falling rain surround them. Cram then jumps seventeen years in time at the start of Part Two as she introduces Blair-Maria, Adela's teenage daughter, wearing a white prom dress and suspended in a chair, high in the air. In Part Two, a linear narrative, Cram explores the legacy of Adela's psychic heritage in her daughter, who struggles to live life as a teenager in Fuente. Further, Cram examines the legacy of generational love as Blair-Maria meets Denver, who is passing through town on his way out west. After the two escape together, Cram reveals that Denver is the son of Soledad and Esteban, thus the generational flight from Fuente continues.

In *Speaking of Soap Operas*, Robert Allen identifies four characteristics, "the combination of which made any given text legible to its readers as soap opera;"

1. Absolute resistance to [narrative] closure
2. Contemporary setting and emphasis on what we might call 'domestic concerns'
3. Didacticism

4. Produced for and consumed by women...most of whom spent their weekdays at home, managing households and taking care of children. (137-38)

In *The Dynasty Years: Hollywood Television and Critical Media Studies*, Jostein Gripsrud refutes the third characteristic of didacticism stating, “the openly didactic character of the early soaps is gone. This is however, not to say that their didactic function for the audience is gone” (164). Gripsrud further reflects on the genre by highlighting the use of the term ‘opera’ that soap opera and ‘opera proper’ both share an “emphasis on emotions and ‘matters of the heart,’ and a leaning towards hyperbole and the excessive” (163). Thus, the soap opera model implies perpetual iterations and transformations of human relationships. Further it implies a strong connection between popular culture and gender roles. Lastly, the US soap opera model also implies cultural influence or even colonization, as US soap operas are beamed all over the world and often exist as the markers of US culture. Gripsrud’s study focuses primarily on the impact of the US television prime time soap opera, *Dynasty*, on his native Norway which he states engaged “questions of cultural identity in an increasingly internationalized media culture” (163). Gripsrud examines how the cultural lives portrayed in the soap opera influenced the cultural ideals and lives of the Norwegian viewers of the program. Therefore, the soap opera model also traffics in transcultural dynamics although with the hegemonic and subaltern constantly vying for position and power.

Cram juxtaposes *Dynasty*, throughout her play, against the lives of the residents of Fuente. *Dynasty* “focused primarily on the lives and loves of Blake Carrington (John Forsythe), a wealthy Denver oil tycoon, his wife Krystle (Linda Evans) and ex-wife, Alexis (Joan Collins), a British ex-patriate.” (Museum of Broadcast Communications). As a teenager, Adela viewed her rival, Soledad, as Alexis, with both of them fighting over one man, Esteban (i.e. Blake). Adela warns Soledad:

ADELA. This town ain’t big enough for two Alexisssss...Know what I mean?

SOLEDAD. I’m afraid I don’t.

ADELA. Don’t Crystal me, Alexis.

SOLEDAD. I don’t know what you’re talking about. (24)

As an adult, Soledad desires to be Alexis Carrington, the conniving British ex-patriate as she states, “Like that show *Dynasty* on the television set. I want an Alexis Carrington life with stapled hair and shoulder pad sex” (9). In her 1989 article, “Reading *Dynasty*: Television and Reception Theory,” Jane

Feuer states, "For a moment in the mid-1980s the television serial *Dynasty* ceased being merely a program and took on the proportions of a major mass-cultural cult" (444). Further, in examining the impact of the soap opera on US culture, she states, "*Dynasty's* interpretive communities never merely interpret- they enact, they are counted as demographics, they consume not just a fictional text but a whole range of products as well" (458). The character of Alexis Carrington was introduced at the end of the first season when she reappeared in Denver after having spent "sixteen years out of the country, mainly in Acapulco," in order to testify "to Blake's violent streak" (Gripsrud 203). The development of Alexis' storylines aimed to give her "a power-base from which she could challenge Blake Carrington" (Gripsrud 206), the show's patriarch. Gripsrud ascribes Alexis' appeal to her "uninhibited use of her (and men's) sexuality in her struggle for power... which turns her into a partially positive figure whose ruthlessness comes across more or less as an ironic, humorously acceptable feature of the ultimate competitive 'career woman' of the 1980's, a decade of male and female yuppies" (Gripsrud 231). Cram chooses this US soap opera to parallel the lives in Fuente as opposed to a Latin American soap opera or telenovela: a cultural disconnect is created when Latina/o characters desire to be Anglo and British characters, thus exploring the complexities of a transcultural existence in which the subaltern attempts to exist on a level playing field with the hegemonic while still defining itself in light of hegemonic cultural references. The choice of *Dynasty* also reflects the social, cultural and class differences in Fuente. Further, the choice of Alexis, a ruthless, power-hungry British-born ex-patriate who has spent years living in Mexico, exists in counterpoint to the women of Fuente's cultural identity and yet parallels their desire to challenge patriarchal notions of gender roles as well as social status in the world.

Cram also employs the soap opera paradigm in exploring the heightened musicality which arises from the collisions of the cultures in this southwestern town. In the play's foreword, Cram provides information on the issue of accents in the play, "For Chaparro, Soledad, and Esteban, English is their first language but the rhythm of their speech is infused with Spanish. Spanish is Adela's first language. Omar was born in an Arabic-speaking country" (5). Thus, through the valuation of the accent and English as a second language, Cram explores the interpolation of the musicality of Spanish with English, the syntax of Spanish in English and the syntax and musicality of Arabic and English. Anzaldúa writes, "At Pan-American University, I and all Chicano students were required to take two speech classes. The purpose: to get

rid of our accents. Attacks on one's form of expression with intent to censor are a violation of the First Amendment. Los Anglo con cara de inocente nos arrancó la lengua.² Wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out" (76). Anzaldúa thus implies that the use of accented English is not only a form of protected free speech, it is also a valid form of self expression. Somehow the accented language then represents the transcultural collision of cultures. Cram is thus embracing accent as a means to theatricalize the multiplicity of cultural collisions in US society. Cram isn't cutting out tongues and she isn't taming them. She is letting them exist in all their range of expression. Further, throughout her play, Cram explores the influence of Anglo television culture on the lives of these characters, specifically Soledad and Blair-Maria, when each magically begins talking in a "slightly strange British accent" while channeling the voice of Alexis Carrington, the principal character in *Dynasty*. The linguistic cultural collisions are most evident in Soledad's character where she says, "I'm bored... Like, get off me you feel heavy, bored. Like you could crush my bones. Why you such a bone crusher, Chappo?" and then later in the scene, while channeling Alexis Carrington with a British accent, Soledad says, "Stop your infernal chattering, you're giving me a migraine" (8). Thus, in Soledad, the sly, earthy quality of her language is juxtaposed against the arch, aristocratic language of *Dynasty* highlighting how the foreign hegemonic accent of Carrington impacts the life of the subaltern characters in Fuente. Further Cram chooses the British accent of the character of Alexis, instead of the US accent of her archrival on *Dynasty*, Krystle, creating an additional hegemonic influence whereby the subaltern Latino culture is impacted by US as well as British cultures via this television program.

In her characters, Cram also utilizes the soap opera model to explore the intersection of the Anglo, Latino and Arabic cultures, and natural and supernatural worlds. In Part One, Adela, a "south-of-the-equator witch" (58), has cast a spell on the Aquanet hairspray sold in Omar's store to try to secure Esteban's love: "I put a spell on Omar's Aquanet... But my magic couldn't make a man love me who loved someone else" (45). The hairspray becomes a conduit for alternate realities as well as a weapon. Whenever Soledad sprays her hair with Aquanet, she begins speaking like Alexis Carrington which ends up positively affecting her relationship with Chaparro:

SOLEIDAD. I ain't a lady, Chaparro. And I don't never drink beer. (as Alexis Carrington). Champagne cocktail's my particular poison. (Soledad stops herself. She is not quite sure where these words, this accent are coming from.)

CHAPARRO. This some game? Something you read 'bout in a lady's magazine? I can play games. I can be Blake. Look at me I'm Blake. What he talk like? Like this? (in a real Gringo accent) Well, hello Soledad, fine weather we're having here at the estate. (10)

Not only does Cram juxtapose the life in Fuente with the world of a television show which portrays the lives of a wealthy US oil family, she also employs a product used to straighten hair to highlight linguistic code switching and the performance of racial and class difference. Cram problematizes the transcultural landscape of Fuente in Adela, a South American woman with supernatural powers who creates magical hairspray which turns Soledad, a Latina working class woman, into a wealthy British ex-patriate.

In Part Two, both children are named after television shows. Blair-Maria reveals, "I'm named after some fat TV actress my Dad thought was pretty and of course the Virgin Mary" (68). She's referring to the television show, *Facts of Life*, and the lead character, Blair, a wealthy, conceited girl who attends "an exclusive girls school, Eastland" (TV). By naming this character after a wealthy Anglo girl and the Virgin Mary, Cram highlights the transcultural issues which influence her identity as a bicultural child of a South American mother and Arab father. Further, Denver reveals he is named after a city because, "My mother liked some old TV show took place there" (68). Thus, Denver, a Latino child, is named after *Dynasty*, the soap opera about Anglo wealth and power. In both cases, the media-based names of these children highlight their transcultural identities.

Ultimately, however, Cram completely upends the representational dynamics in the US prime time soap opera framework to reflect a more diverse twenty-first century world. Cram's Fuente embraces then ultimately rejects the world of *Dynasty*. Whereas *Dynasty* highlights the lives of the wealthy Anglo and British ex-patriates living in the US, Cram's world reflects a transcultural reality, a town where US, Latino and Arab cultures mingle, intermarry and create a hybrid society. Cram does mirror *Dynasty*'s portrayal of strong women challenging the patriarchy, where Soledad, Adela and Blair-Maria emerge as resilient and empowered women regardless of the machinations of the men in Fuente, just as Christine Geraghty in *Women and Soap Opera: A Study of Prime Time Soaps* states that "Alexis in *Dynasty* was the first woman to assert herself so clearly and capably in this way as a business rival to Blake Carrington. She takes on the masculine attributes of the hero and returns them in spades" (65). Yet while they may mirror certain power dynamics in hegemonic soap opera icons of the past, these characters' lives catapult them

into a varied, diverse present which cannot be contained by the rigid binaries of wealthy Anglo oil tycoons and their machinations for love and power.

Cram closes her play with the two teenagers facing the Pacific Ocean. “Blair-Maria slowly floats upward. Denver looks up at her, just as their hands are about to part, Denver floats up and joins her” (73). Their levitations signify a desire to physically disconnect from the cultural, racial and class struggles of their lives as defined against hegemonic norms and find greater happiness in the liminal space between earth and sky. The final image also places lasting value on the supernatural South American identity which can and does co-exist with the characters’ US identity.

All three plays discussed in this essay utilize and transform existing artistic models, fugue, hip hop and soap opera, which emerge in large part from US and European cultures.³ Just as transculturation implicitly involves the intersection of hegemonic and subaltern to create a new cultural form, by appropriating and transforming these existing frameworks, each Latina playwright creates an altogether new artistic model. While Svich and Cram address their respective artistic forms in compelling ways, Hudes most thoroughly engages with the original musical form. Hudes more overtly tackles the complexities and limitations of the fugue by naming her scenes as fugue or prelude and juxtaposing the voices of her characters utilizing a spare, linguistic, poetic musicality. Further, Hudes uses the musical form in her play’s title, *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue*, thus signaling the significant impact the fugue has not only as a structural device but one which honors a soldier’s plight.

In addition, in all three plays, this engaging with form and forging new artistic structures in itself contains an oppositional stance by challenging hegemonic theatrical norms in US theater. While one might applaud these innovations, one might also call into question their commercial viability. Yet, all three plays have also succeeded in the marketplace. Hudes’s play was a finalist for the 2007 Pulitzer Prize in Drama (Pulitzer) and has been produced Off-Off Broadway at the Culture Project in New York City and the Alliance Theater in Atlanta, among other cities. Svich’s play was produced in 2007 by artheater-Cologne, Germany and was developed at INTAR in New York City. Cram’s play was produced at Barrington Stage Company in Massachusetts in 2005 (Barrington Stage) as well as developed by the Labyrinth Theater Company in New York City and the O’Neill Playwrights Conference.

If a hallmark of twenty-first century transculturation is equal engagement with various cultural worlds which forms new identities, these

playwrights' theatrical experimentations also connect to a transcultural process. Each playwright aims to engage equally with a variety of cultural and musical influences as each creates innovative structures, linguistic landscapes and complex characters. Hudes engages with Puerto Rican and U.S. cultures in her characters' lives as well as the fugue form. Svich explores Latin American and European cultures in her characters as well as the hip hop form. Cram delves into US, Latin American and Arab cultures in her characters as well as a US soap opera form highlighting a British character. This multiplicity of cultural engagements impacts the structure, characters and language of each play.

If these playwrights had reflected a previous incarnation of the transculturation process, their plays might have resulted in the hegemonic cultures dominating the characters' lives with the other forms and traditions becoming subaltern and risking erasure. Hudes's might have further highlighted dominant US mainstream culture and strictly adhered to a dominant fugal structure. Svich might have further emphasized the European culture and utilized a more monolithic musical form as opposed to the multi-faceted hip hop form. Cram might have focused more deeply on US Anglo culture and utilized a soap opera which more singularly reinforced a US Anglo world. However, these are neither the plays nor the choices these playwrights have made. By embracing cultural multiplicity and simultaneity of cultural engagement, these playwrights unleash a panoply of possibilities for the structure, characters and language of their plays. The result is a rich theatrical landscape which more accurately reflects and refracts the complex cultural milieu of the twenty-first century.

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Notes

¹ While soap opera has at times been used as an essentialist, pejorative term to describe Latina/o plays, here Cram utilizes the soap opera model to examine the complexities of character which hence creates a more nuanced and multi-faceted play construction.

² Translation: The Anglo with a look of innocence on their faces cut out our tongue.

³ As mentioned earlier, Cram chooses the US soap opera form, however this artistic model is quite influential throughout Latin America in the form of the telenovela.

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